

OUTSIDE ★ INSIDE

Looming beneath the moonlit night sky, about two hundred paces ahead of us was the silhouette of a grand manor house lying amidst a vast expanse of grassland, at the center of a large clearing, surrounded around its four sides by walls of squarely trimmed hedges.

I was not aware that we were descending in a gentle slope. At some point during our conversation, the road uphill had reached a highest point, then slowly the view broadened: I imagined a circle at which center and bottom stood the manor, like a boulder in a crater, except that the house was not a boulder. It was an even more covert position than if the crater did not exist. From the town's perspective, this place was simply void.

We traveled on the main path for a while before turning left onto a small branch that curved inwards, getting further away from the manor's front exterior. It was nearing a single spot of light hanging at eye level, from which appeared more, this time moving, silhouettes of horses. *The stables*. "I would expect Alice to be back earlier than us," Lily said. "Her route was shorter than ours. And yes, she had arrived before we have."

"How are you able to see Alice's carriage when we're still that far from the stables?" I asked.

"I simply *count*," she replied.

There were three more carriages aside from ours situated on a grass patch by a small wooden-roofed building. Six brown horses stood in line occupying six out of the total eight stalls in the building, some asleep, some still moving their heads sideways, awake. A couple of lanterns were hung ahead of the stalls, their flame at the heart flickering lightly, casting shadows along the horsebarn's brick walls. Lily ordered me to exit our carriage, then removed the harnesses from our pair of horses and led them to their respective places.

"These are our main means of transportation," she said. "They are quite docile, but possess quite some harm if their wielder is not well-trained. You will be taught the art of mastering these fellows later."

"I see."

"This way," she gestured to the gravel road between the carriages and the stalls. At its end was a granite threshold polished by two potted plants at two sides. Lights were also present from above the pots. As we approached the threshold, a plain wooden door slowly appeared behind the shadows. Despite the eerie atmosphere intensified by random black bulks from all directions and the silence in the rattling wind, I found the light to quite settle my mind.

A fire during the dead of night, aided by moonlight. Most assuring.

Lily took out a silver key and inserted it into the door lock; it made a clicking sound, then the door opened with a hiss. She removed her hat and for the first time, I could finally see her full face.

“Welcome to Madeleine. This will be your home from now on.”



Though not so lavish, dinner was prepared attentively; apparently the person in charge of cooking had paid a handful of emphasis into nutritional values. Starting from soup appetizer to beefsteak followed by mixed rice and finally fruits as dessert, everything was tended to until the finishing touch.

I glanced onto the diner’s grandfather clock as I was chewing a tender piece of beef. Nineteen forty-five. There was still plenty of time. My gaze shifted to Lily who sat across me, resting on her wavy blonde hair, then her plain forehead, her smooth eyebrows, her narrow nose, her red lips, her brown twinkling eyes finding their place at a fixed point on the ceiling. Had she let loose her hair when we were on our way to the manor, I wouldn’t have found these features to strike me so much now. And the fair, almost

pale skin seemed to contrast with each feature’s strong shade.

Suddenly the brown pair of eyes was looking at me. Then the red lips were moving. “Is there something on my face, sweetie?” Lily asked.

I flushed. “No--nothing. Really.”

“I see,” she smiled. “I am glad that you seem to enjoy your meal; look at the completely finished dishes. Not wasting anything of your meals is also a good quality to achieve, but looks like I will not have to tell you that.”

“It’s because the food is delicious,” I said.

“Alice made them,” she said. “It is quite the tradition here to have her prepare the first meal for newcomers. She has yet to disappoint anyone.”

I downed a glass of apple juice in one go. “I’d like to practice cooking. May I ask her to instruct me how to?”

“Definitely. As I have said, in this place you are allowed to do anything as long as the goal is to improve your skills as a fine maiden, and every staff and student here can provide assistance. I will talk to Alice about your interest in advance. Now then--” she looked at the clock. *Thirteen minutes left.* “I think she has gone to sleep. Your roommate should also be up there too.”

“I’m sharing a room with the other new student?”

“Yes. The other girls already have a space of their own. All we need to do is prepare an empty room that is

convenient enough. A bunk bed, a shared wardrobe, two separate desks and a shared bathroom should be appealing to you, or would you like to make other requests?"

"That's fine, thank you," I said, merrily. That was more than enough. "So... about my roommate. What's she like?"

Lily frowned. "I have yet to meet her in person, actually. I remember that she comes from the western mainland, and she does not seem to speak our dialect well, either. It is rare for a foreigner to contact us, to add."

"Have you had any cases like her before?"

"No, not during my time. In fact, I doubt that this school had even admitted a foreign student before, though other branches of the Council may have done so. I might have to check the alumni records. But anyways, trivial matters aside--", she looked at me, "the lesson on rules must be postponed until tomorrow, I am afraid. Right now there is yet another matter of importance."

Five to twenty. I picked a strawberry and put it in my mouth. "All right. What is it?"

"I will make it short," Lily continued. Her arms now rested on the table; I noticed red nails now that her gloves were off. "A tradition of our school is that a certain ritual would take place on the first morning after a new student's arrival. We call it the 'offering' ritual, as the presence of a new face here is considered a contribution to the school's well-being, and thus must be of utmost gratitude and appreciation." *She's making it long, it's almost hilarious.* "So

basically tomorrow morning you will be here five minutes earlier than seven hours, and that will be your assigned seat." Lily pointed to my seat. "Naturally, the new girl will sit next to you. Then whatever the other girls do, you copy. Do not worry, there will be no difficult task, sweetie."

A mixed feeling of suspicion and curiosity engulfed me. "Why am I oblivious to the ritual's contents? Surely I'll do better if I know what I'm going to do."

"It is the nature of the ritual," she said. "I understand your hesitation, but I am certain that you will be fine. Now then, routine will resume once the ritual is complete. What day is it today?" she asked.

"Day of the Soil," I said.

"Delightful. We perform chores on Day of the Sun, mark it in your mind. Nothing is more refreshing than cleaning up on a sunny Day of the Sun. You will receive the chores division table tomorrow, also."

"Is there a specific timetable for each day's routine?"

"Yes, though not strictly constructed. There are gathering occasions where every inhabitant must be present, but there are free periods, too, which can be made flexible for each student. You might want to consult the general timetable I have prepared in your room."

"I will, thank you very much," I said. The fact that these people here had obviously thought to the extent of tiny details was admirable. Nonetheless, despite the hospitality, there existed a subtle note of creepiness in the way

preparations were made. *Why would they choose an evening to escort me to the manor?* Nighttime was certainly *not* an appropriate time for an admittance. And aside from that, there was this mysterious aura from all the way back at the bar--no, from the moment I exited the train boarding at this town--to the very manor itself, with its concealing features, and the ritual thing Lily had said, *wait, even Lily seems to be hiding something behind that smile of hers...*

My stray thoughts were prevented by a loud, echoing *clang* from the grandfather clock. Already twenty hours. I composed myself--*you're making things up, Lucy*--before joining Lily to the washing sink. After we had done cleaning up the dishes, she guided me towards a back exit where we would find the main hall.

"You may have realized it," she said, "that this is the grand staircase. Turn left when you reach the fork. Your place would be the third room to your right. Take your time, sweetie, as I must excuse you." She put a hand on my back. "Have a good stay, Lucy. A great time awaits you."

"I hope so." Her palm and fingers were radiating warm heat onto my body. As Lily turned to the big double-door behind us, I made my way up the stairs.